

# Community Conversations About Mental Health

## Planning Guide







U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

On January 16, 2013, President Barack Obama directed Secretary Kathleen Sebelius of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Secretary Arne Duncan of the U.S. Department of Education to launch a national conversation on mental health to reduce the shame and secrecy associated with mental illness, encourage people to seek help if they are struggling with mental health problems, and encourage individuals whose friends or family are struggling to connect them to help.

Mental health problems affect nearly every family. Yet as a nation, we have too often struggled to have an open and honest conversation about these issues. Misperceptions, fears of social consequences, discomfort associated with talking about these issues with others, and discrimination all tend to keep people silent. Meanwhile, if they get help, most people with mental illnesses can and do recover and lead happy, productive, and full lives.

This national conversation will give Americans a chance to learn more about mental health issues. People across the nation are planning community conversations to assess how mental health problems affect their communities and to discuss topics related to the mental health of young people. In so doing, they may also decide how they might take steps to improve mental health in their families, schools, and communities. This could include a range of possible steps to establish or improve prevention of mental illnesses, promotion of mental health, public education and awareness, early identification, treatment, crisis response, and recovery supports available in their communities.

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## Goals and Objectives of the Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health

*The Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health is designed to help individuals and organizations who want to organize community conversations achieve three potential objectives:*

- Get others talking about mental health to break down misperceptions and promote recovery and healthy communities;
- Find innovative community-based solutions to mental health needs, with a focus on helping young people; and
- Develop clear steps for communities to address their mental health needs in a way that complements existing local activities.

The Toolkit includes:

1. An *Information Brief* section that provides data and other facts regarding mental health and mental illness and how communities can improve prevention of mental illnesses, promotion of mental health, public education and awareness, early identification, treatment, crisis response, and recovery supports available in their communities.
2. A *Discussion Guide* section that is intended for use in holding community conversation meetings of 8–12 people each. (In a community forum with more participants, the audience would divide into groups of this size for much of their time together.) It provides discussion questions, sample views, ideas, and an overall structure for dialogue and engagement on mental health issues.
3. A *Planning Guide* section that describes a variety of ways in which people can facilitate their community conversations and take next steps at the local level to raise awareness about mental health and promote access to mental health services.

Mental health issues in our communities—particularly for our youth—are complex and challenging; but, by coming together and increasing our understanding and raising awareness, we can make a difference.

# The Planning Guide for Community Conversations About Mental Health

The *Planning Guide* for Community Conversations About Mental Health is written for people who want to organize conversations on mental health in their own community. In this guide you will find step-by-step information for planning conversations, recruiting and training facilitators, recruiting conversation participants, and identifying steps participants may want to take in order to raise awareness about mental health.

This guide is intended to inform conversations on increasing education and awareness about mental health. It is not intended to support, facilitate, or in any other way encourage external parties to communicate with government officials to effect legislative or policy changes.





# Community Conversations About Mental Health Planning Guide



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## Disclaimer

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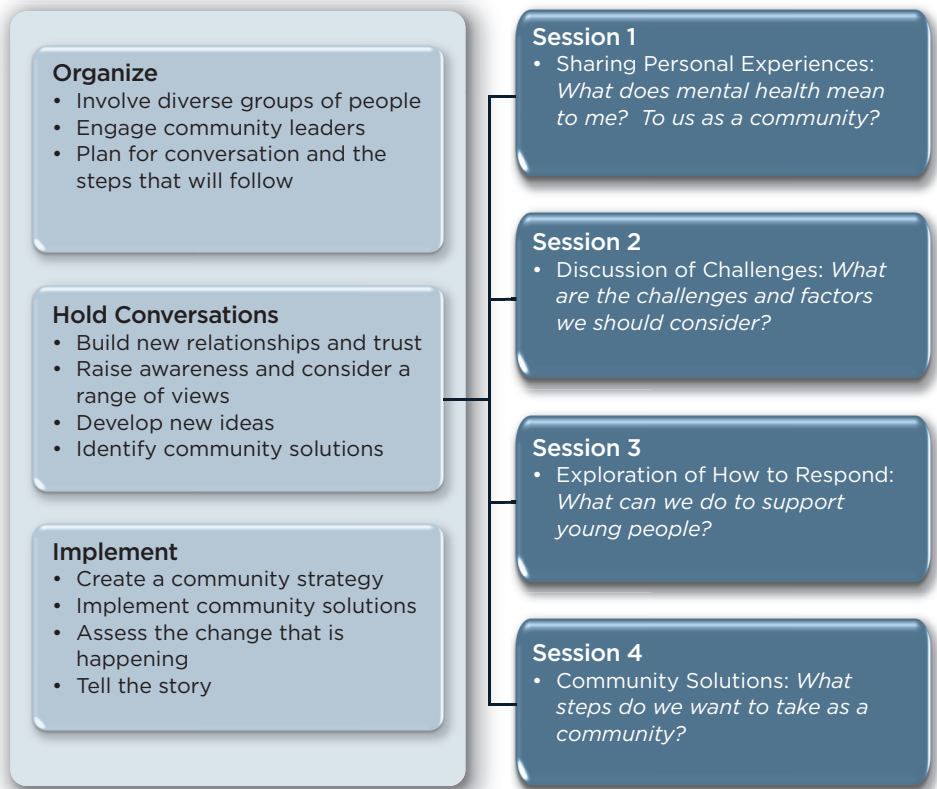
## SAMHSA Descriptor

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities.



# Potential Process for Planning Conversations Across Your Community

There are many ways to organize a discussion in your community. You could start from scratch and build a conversation or series of conversations that include individuals from across your community. Or if you are part of an existing group that meets regularly, such as a support group, a PTA, a book club, or a youth group, you could organize a discussion on mental health within that existing group. Much of the material in this planning guide covers topics such as participant recruitment that you may not need if you already have an existing group for your conversation. Pick and choose which steps make sense for your community conversation.



# Part 1:

## Set Goals for Holding a Community Conversation About Mental Health

It could be helpful to create a team of individuals who help organize your community conversation. This team could be responsible for

- Building diverse partnerships with community groups and individuals,
- Planning for how the conversations will happen,
- Recruiting community members for the conversations,
- Recruiting facilitators for the conversations, and
- Thinking about how to support ideas that result from the conversations.

When building a leadership team, consider the variety of diversity in your community:

- Racial and ethnic backgrounds
- Religion or philosophical views
- Political views
- Sexual orientation
- Age
- Disability
- Profession
- Neighborhoods
- Viewpoints on mental health
- Education level
- Gender
- Socio-economics

Also consider how you could include:

- Young people
- People with mental health problems
- People with lived experience of mental illness
- Parents, caregivers, and guardians
- Teachers, school administrators, and other educators
- Health care and wellness professionals
- Law enforcement professionals
- Public officials
- Human and social service providers
- Mental health professionals

- People who work at state and federal agencies
- Senior citizens
- Adults who work with young people

At each phase of your work as a team, consider asking “Who is missing?” and how you can include those people.

Because mental health challenges directly affect young people, consider what roles young people can play in your community conversation. Youth can help with the organizing work as part of your planning team, serve as co-facilitators of the conversation, or add their ideas as conversation participants. They can also organize their own youth conversations.

People with *lived experience* (individuals with lived experience of mental illness and substance use disorders who are in recovery from these conditions), or peers, have a unique capacity to help others recover from mental and substance use disorders by sharing their skills, strength, and hope for recovery. Peer support has been recognized as a valuable and important service for recovery from mental and substance use disorders.

You may want to include psychologists, social workers, peers, family support specialists, and youth mentors for their expertise and in case people need support during or after your conversation.

*Many organizations provide additional information on how to involve professionals and persons with lived experience in community planning and holding dialogues. For more information about this topic, refer to Appendix 3, “Helpful Resources and Websites.”*

*(These materials and links are offered for informational purposes only and should not be construed as an endorsement of the referenced organization’s programs or activities.)*

## Step 1: Share leadership, decision-making, and responsibilities

You can use these questions to help the team think about how to share decision making:

- How are we involving young people in the planning process?
- How are we involving people with lived experience and their family members in the planning process?
- How are any decisions going to be made?

*For more information on involving young people, see Appendix 1, “Including Young People on Your Team.”*



### Tips for Building Strong and Engaged Community Teams

1. **Set clear expectations.** What needs to happen, by when, and who is responsible? If people know what they're expected to do and by when, they are better able to develop a roadmap for achieving specific tasks and goals.
2. **Share skills and talents.** In the beginning ask everyone to write down their talents and skills, so that when the group needs to complete tasks, those requests can be based on skills people have.
3. **Foster a creative environment.** Be open and welcome diverse ideas and ways of thinking. Show that everyone is valued and is an important part of the group.
4. **Continue recruiting volunteers.** Even if people were not involved in the initial community conversation about mental health, they may be interested in finding solutions and helping to address challenges. Allowing new people to join brings in new energy, a new network, greater inclusion, and a stronger sense of ownership of the effort.
5. **Celebrate progress.**

### Step 2: Set goals

Once the team is in place, you can work together to define your goals, clarify your purpose, and create a plan for the work to follow. Think about the outcomes that you want to see from working together as well as from the conversation. Consider:

- How your team will work together;
- The kinds of change you want to see in your community as a result of this effort;
- How many people you want to participate; and
- If and how you want to implement the ideas generated as a result of the conversation.

### Step 3: Think about how you may want to help people take next steps after the conversation

During the conversations, participants may consider how to address mental health challenges in their community. As a team, think about:

- How to gather ideas from the conversations and help people choose priorities;
- How to track themes and trends from the ideas for next steps as they emerge; and
- How to plan for and assess the sustainability of your community solutions.

## Part 2: Decide on Your Conversation Format

Consider what questions you want participants to answer or discuss and how you want to organize participants in order to maximize the potential for a productive conversation.

*Example of how you could organize participants:* If you will have a large number of participants, you could break them into smaller “conversation groups.” Groups of 8–12 individuals with two facilitators each could allow for everyone to contribute.

The *Discussion Guide and Information Brief* sections of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health* provide additional information to help you structure your conversation and select topics for discussion.

# Part 3: Recruit Conversation Participants

## Step 1: Review your recruitment goals

Refer back to the recruitment goals you generated in Part 1, Step 2.

## Step 2: Work together to decide who you will recruit

As a team, consider answering these questions:

- How many people do we need to involve in order to reach our goals?
- What groups do we need to involve?
- What might keep people in these groups from participating?
- Who from our team can reach out to these groups?

## Step 3: Consider taking extra steps to recruit groups who often don't participate

One of the biggest challenges is recruiting people who aren't typically invited or don't feel they will be welcome. Some of these groups might include the following:

- *Youth*  
Think about creative ways to recruit from clubs, sports teams, or other organizations that serve youth, with appropriate consent of the adult leadership.
- *People with lived experience, including people who are recovering from, mental health problems*  
Think about reaching out to recovery groups, support groups, and organizations that support people with mental health problems and their families in ways that respect and are attentive to privacy.
- *Culturally and economically diverse groups*  
Think about finding a leader in these communities who can help spread the word. Also, you may want to seek out informal leaders from local businesses or community clubs.



## Step 4: Plan your invitation

Think about answering the following three questions in your invitation:

- *What are we doing?*  
For example: We are hosting a community conversation about mental health.
- *What are we trying to accomplish?*  
For example: We want our community to have a better understanding and be more supportive of mental health, especially for young people.
- *Why does this matter to the person you're speaking with?*  
For example:
  - As a young person, you want to have ways to help you or one of your friends deal with stress and other mental health challenges.
  - As a mental health professional, you understand the benefit of having more community members know how to support people with mental health issues.
  - As an educator, you see how these issues affect students and their ability to learn.
  - As a parent, you want your community to support children's mental health.
  - As a community member, you want to ensure a healthy environment for yourself, your family, and your neighbors.

## Step 5: Plan how you will reach out to those you want to involve

You can combine personal invitations and general publicity. You can recruit through:

- Face-to-face communication
- Phone calls
- Community group or meeting presentations
- Traditional media such as flyers, brochures, or radio interviews
- Online resources such as social media announcements, blog posts, or e-mails
- School websites, assemblies, or PTA meetings

Visit [www.MentalHealth.gov](http://www.MentalHealth.gov) for a list of national organizations who may want to help communities hold community conversations. You may wish to invite a local affiliate of these national partners for additional expertise or as a resource.

One creative way to spark interest in your conversation is to hold mini-conversations. You can give people a chance to experience a condensed, 20-minute sample conversation.

# Part 4: Identify Facilitator Trainers and Recruit Potential Facilitators



You may want to have facilitators in your conversation. The facilitators' role is to create a productive space where people from different backgrounds can talk about mental health. In order to maximize the effectiveness of your facilitators, consider holding a training session in order to discuss the best techniques for facilitating a conversation.

## Step 1: Find trainers skilled in facilitation

Potential trainers include people who have knowledge about mental health or may be skilled in facilitation. Consider:

- People with lived experienced of mental illness
- Peer support workers
- Mental health professionals
- Mediators
- School counselors
- Faith leaders
- People trained in conflict resolution

Some places to look for trainers include:

- Peer support networks and recovery support organizations
- Behavioral health (mental health and substance abuse) service providers
- High schools, community colleges, or universities
- Mediation centers
- Corporations

## Step 2: Identify potential facilitators

To determine how many facilitators you need, think about the number of participants you'd like to have in your conversations. You may want to recruit more facilitators than you need, because it's likely that a few may drop out at the last minute.

When recruiting facilitators, consider people from every sector of the community, including youth.

## Step 3: Plan and schedule trainings for facilitators

Facilitators should receive training to successfully facilitate the meeting. Plan and schedule trainings for facilitators far enough in advance of the event to ensure there is time to address details related to the facilitation.

# Part 5: Planning the Steps for Holding the Conversations

Consider following these steps to help you prepare:

## Step 1: Create a team to handle logistics

It can be helpful to create a team to handle the work.

## Step 2: Find a location

Think about finding a location that feels welcoming to everybody. If possible, identify a contact person at each site who will work with you. Some possible locations include:

- Libraries
- Schools or colleges
- Large meeting rooms in corporate or government buildings
- Neighborhood association buildings
- Houses of worship
- Social service agencies
- Private or civic organizations

Consider whether your location:

- Is easy to find,
- Has sufficient room for your group,
- Is accessible by public transportation,
- Has plenty of parking,
- Has public restrooms, and
- Has elevators and ramps for easy access.

## Step 3: Scheduling

When scheduling your event, consider the schedule for other community events that could conflict with your conversation.



### Step 4: Consider other logistics

Besides the location and schedule, other things to consider when planning the conversations could include:

- Child care
- Translators
- Refreshments
- Carpooling and transportation arrangements
- Arrangements for hearing- or visually impaired participants

You may also want to think about:

- How to distribute materials such as markers, note paper, name tags, and copies of the *Discussion Guide and Information Brief* sections of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health* that facilitators may need before the first session;
- Who organizers and facilitators should call or e-mail if they have questions or problems; and
- How to notify people about weather cancellations.

## Part 6: Plan for Follow-up

During the conversations, people may think about next steps they'd like to take individually and as a community.

Examples of Things We Can Do	
On Our Own or With Others	With Community Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share your story of recovery if you have lived experience.</li> <li>• Reach out to someone who may be under stress.</li> <li>• Think about ways you might manage personal stress.</li> <li>• Share information about mental health with someone you care for.</li> <li>• Learn the signs and symptoms of mental illness and substance use to increase your own mental health literacy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Join or volunteer for an existing community support group working on mental health.</li> <li>• Sponsor a mental health literacy training course.</li> <li>• Meet with others in your community to share the outcomes from your conversation.</li> </ul>

Participants may want to come together shortly after the conversations to share ideas from other groups. If you're hosting a one-day community conversation, you could consider bringing individual groups together at the end of the day to share their ideas for community solutions. If you're holding conversations over several days or weeks, you may want to plan a separate follow-up event where participants can come together to share ideas.



**Tips to provide opportunities for online participation**

Consider using online resources to provide community members who are unable to attend meetings in person opportunities to virtually contribute ideas, participate in brainstorming, weigh in on the group consensus process, and participate in other engagement activities. Examples of online participation tools include message boards, blogs, e-mails, web-based word processors, webcasting, and social media platforms

### Tips on Supporting Community Teams

Here are some steps you can choose to follow if you want to work on next steps after participating in a conversation.

**Step 1:** Join together with others interested in working on community solutions or a specific strategy and create a team.

- Include people with knowledge and experience about mental health and/or access to resources.
- Establish ground rules for working together and procedures for shared decision-making, including a timeline and a meeting schedule.
- Clarify goals: What do we want to achieve in our community? How will we know if we are successful?
- Reach out to others in your community working on these issues to see how you can work together or share resources.
- Think about what challenges you might face when implementing a community solution and how you could prevent or overcome them.

**Step 2:** The members of your team may want to choose a team leader.

**Step 3:** Make a plan to take steps to increase awareness about mental health in your community. *For more information, see Appendix 2, "Community Solutions Planning Template."*

Prior to holding the follow-up event, consider consolidating the ideas shared from each participant and group.

Below are some ideas for how to organize a conversation about taking next steps.

### Identifying community strengths and challenges

Every community has strengths or assets that give it value. There might also be challenges. The chart template below can help you as you discuss strengths and challenges.

**Step 1:** List or share your community strengths, such as people, places, or organizations. This list can include those who are already working on the issue.

**Step 2:** After identifying your community strengths, think about what might stand in the way of your work. List those challenges.

**Step 3:** Think about ways to address the challenges. List them on your chart.

Community Strengths		
People	Places	Institutions/ Organizations
Community Challenges		
Challenges		Ideas to Address Challenges

### Prioritizing and planning next steps

Consider a method of prioritizing options for next steps that participants may want to help implement. You may want to have a mix of long-term goals and short-term projects.

Once you have identified next steps, think about narrowing them down to one or two that you can accomplish as a group. One way to narrow down the list is to ask participants to put a check next to their top three choices on the list of next steps. Give people a chance to make a case for the ideas that they checked, noting the questions below:

Which ideas:

- Could be combined?
- Address the impact of mental health in ways that affect everyone?
- Might have a long-term effect?
- Require resources to accomplish our goal?
- Could build upon our community strengths?

You can continue discussing ideas until there are one or two ideas that the group is committed to working on.

## Developing a plan

- You can create a plan using the “Community Solutions Planning Template” in Appendix 2.
- You may want to share your group’s ideas online and with partners in the community.

# Part 7: Special Considerations for Facilitators

- If you are facilitating a community conversation, you may want to make sure you are consistent and clear about your role. Let participants know that your role is not to dispense mental health advice and that the conversations are not designed for that purpose. Do this as often as needed.
- Sharing personal experiences with mental health issues can be powerful to help educate others and build awareness and support. Such disclosure should be done at the discretion and by the choice of the individual.
- Sometimes sharing personal experiences can be difficult and emotionally taxing. Some people who have little experience sharing personal stories may need to prepare themselves to do so ahead of time and may benefit from support during and after the meeting by family, friends, or mental health providers.
- During these conversations, participants will discuss mental health, trauma, resilience, and recovery. It is important to give participants advance notice at the beginning of the meeting that some of the experiences shared may be difficult to hear. You may want to concentrate on lessons learned and focus on themes of resilience and recovery.
- Strive to create a safe, supportive place for participants by promoting the ideas of openness, non-judgment, and respect for others. You can initiate short breaks or shift the topics as needed.
- Remind participants that mental health issues affect all of us. Some examples of mental health conditions include major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorder. Most of us can live healthy lives if what we experience is addressed early and treated if necessary.
- ***If it appears that someone is having difficulty discussing trauma or mental health issues or is actually in crisis, you can suggest they call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). This hotline is staffed 24 hours-a-day for those in crisis. The crisis line should not be used as a substitute for professional health and mental health care consultation. If there is an immediate emergency, call 911.***



# Appendix 1: Including Young People on Your Team

To build communities that support the mental health of all their members, it is helpful to include the voices of future generations. Mental health challenges directly affect young people. As you work to organize community conversations on mental health, consider including youth from the beginning. Young people of all ages can contribute creative and important ideas.

You may want to ask yourself these questions as you do this work

- How many young people (high school age) and young adults (18–25) are part of our work? What diverse backgrounds do they represent?
- Are young people involved in a meaningful way?
- Are young people involved in all parts of our work?
- How can we create our planning meetings to include youth voices?
- What kind of processes do we have in place to make sure all voices are included in decision-making?

Tips for involving young people in your team

### ***Ask youth for their input***

Spend some focused time with young people talking about the issue. How do they see it? What aspects seem most important to them? How would they like things to change? Keep the youth perspective in mind as you develop messaging and invite people to join the conversation. Incorporate their language into the overall project description.

### ***Go where young people are***

Reach out to local schools, colleges, community centers, youth groups, and other places where young people are. Consider reaching out to groups like student councils and student governments, student interest organizations, tutoring services, etc.

### ***Partner with groups that engage with youth***

Consider having youth organizers, facilitators, schools, clubs, family groups, congregations, and other organizations and individuals that empower youth join you in your work. Get their advice about the best ways to reach youth for participation in your efforts.

***Keep youth in mind when planning logistics***

Think about planning meetings and conversations around school, sports, and work schedules. Ask young participants what times work for them. Evenings and/or weekends might be the best time to meet for many people; however, it depends on the group. Identify meeting locations that are comfortable for youth. Look for sites that can be reached on foot or with public transportation.

***Methods of communication***

Many young people spend a lot of time online or on their phones. In-person invitations are best, but you may want to consider also reaching out and keeping in touch through social media and/or texting. Social media pages and texting campaigns can reach other audiences too—not just young people. Make it clear in an invitation that young people are encouraged to attend the meeting.

***Make room for young people during meetings***

As you listen to young people in your community, think about being open to new and creative ways of doing things. Consider setting aside time just after the meeting to answer questions people might have about terms or logistics. And consider making time for relationship building, fun, and refreshments.



# Appendix 2: Community Solutions Planning Template

1. What is the <b>overall goal</b> of our public engagement effort?	2. What is the <b>focus of our community team</b> ?	3. What is the <b>topic</b> we want to work on?	4. What is the <b>outcome</b> we want to see?	5. <b>Why</b> do we want this change?
6. What would <b>success</b> look like?	7. What <b>obstacles</b> might prevent success?	8. What <b>information</b> do we need to help us achieve the change we want?	9. What <b>currently</b> is being done to address this issue?	10. <b>Who else</b> do we need on our community team?
11. <b>What resources</b> do we need?	12. <b>What must be done</b> to achieve our goals? List next steps and time rane for each.		13. What is a <b>desirable first step</b> ? (Do-able and indicative of progress)	
	Next Steps	Time Frame		

# Appendix 3: Helpful Resources and Websites

(Note: These organizations, materials, and links are offered for informational purposes only and should not be construed as an endorsement of the referenced organization’s programs or activities.)

Resources	
• Information About Mental Health	• <a href="http://www.MentalHealth.gov">http://www.MentalHealth.gov</a>
• Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)	• <a href="http://www.SAMHSA.gov">http://www.SAMHSA.gov</a>
• National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)	• <a href="http://www.nimh.nih.gov">http://www.nimh.nih.gov</a>
• Additional information you could use to host a conversation in your community	• <a href="http://www.CreatingCommunitySolutions.org">http://www.CreatingCommunitySolutions.org</a>
Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Mental Illness	
• Suicide Prevention Resource Center	• <a href="http://www.sprc.org">http://www.sprc.org</a>
• The Institute of Medicine’s <i>Preventing Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities</i>	• <a href="http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2009/Preventing-Mental-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Disorders-Among-Young-People-Progress-and-Possibilities.aspx">http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2009/Preventing-Mental-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Disorders-Among-Young-People-Progress-and-Possibilities.aspx</a>
• Addressing Bullying	• <a href="http://www.stopbullying.gov">http://www.stopbullying.gov</a>
• National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention	• <a href="http://www.promoteprevent.org">http://www.promoteprevent.org</a>
• Find Youth Info	• <a href="http://www.findyouthinfo.gov">http://www.findyouthinfo.gov</a>
• Million Hearts	• <a href="http://millionhearts.hhs.gov/index.html">http://millionhearts.hhs.gov/index.html</a>
Addressing Public Attitudes	
• Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity, and Social Inclusion	• <a href="http://promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov">http://promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov</a>
• Voice Awards	• <a href="http://www.samhsa.gov/voiceawards">http://www.samhsa.gov/voiceawards</a>
• Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day	• <a href="http://www.samhsa.gov/children">http://www.samhsa.gov/children</a>
Evidence-Based Practices for Treatment	
• National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices	• <a href="http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov">http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov</a>
• National Center for Trauma-Informed Care	• <a href="http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic">http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic</a>
• Children’s Mental Health Initiative Technical Assistance Center	• <a href="http://www.cmhnetwork.org">http://www.cmhnetwork.org</a>
Recovery Support Services	
• National Consumer Technical Assistance Centers	• <a href="http://ncstac.org/index.php">http://ncstac.org/index.php</a>
• Homeless Resource Center	• <a href="http://www.homeless.samhsa.gov">http://www.homeless.samhsa.gov</a>
• Shared Decision Making in Mental Health Tools	• <a href="http://162.99.3.211/shared.asp">http://162.99.3.211/shared.asp</a>
• College Drinking: Changing the Culture	• <a href="http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov">http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov</a>



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[MentalHealth.gov](http://MentalHealth.gov)